

## Rural Tourism and Community Empowerment: Practice of Local Democracy in Pomerania

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### Abstract

*In rural areas of Poland the understanding of development as a participatory process supports local practice of democratic decision-making. LEADER program justifies activities of Local Action Groups, which enhance democratic practices in Poland. Local Action Groups (LAGs) have become distinguished organizations at the local level that engage partners from multiple localities. LAGs can influence local representatives (local leaders) participating in decision-making. The study was conducted in Pomerania, where rural stakeholders responded to initiatives toward tourism development because they understood that could benefit. Tourism development motivated stakeholders to become involved in investigated Local Action Group and LEADER program. LAGs that have been investigated have emerged around rural tourism development theme. The presentation discusses currently perceived features of LAGs that suggest the interactional character of these groups, and disadvantages of LAGs perceived by participating stakeholders.*

**Key words:** *participatory decision-making, local interaction, interactional community, LEADER approach,*

### INTRODUCTION

A new model for rural areas that has been promoted in Poland after 2004 EU accession links participatory approach to decision-making with economic and social sustainability. Nonetheless, many rural societies in Poland have developed a peculiar mindset focused on economic benefits. Residents of north parts of Pomerania also express interest in economic outcomes of local projects and realization of individual needs. It is not surprising therefore that those rural stakeholders have neglected current trends promoting simultaneous sustainable social, political, cultural and economic development.

Participatory approach is an important element of sustainable development. It employs a set of procedures to involve local interest groups. Participation gives them an opportunity to express needs and concerns. Participatory decision-making assures empowering procedures, so that tourism stakeholders influence the process and its outcomes. Participatory tourism decision-making gives stakeholders an opportunity to interact. They express different perceptions of rural tourism and difference in understanding of tourism development. Intensified interaction may for example induce unexpected change of their views and individual goals. The unanticipated outcomes of tourism planning are defined as latent function of tourism decision-making (see: Merton, 1968). Another example of a latent function of the process is an interactional community- a community, which is capable of collective action focused on wellbeing of a locality. Local Action Groups that emerged in Poland demonstrate features of international communities (see: Wilkinson, 1991).

In rural areas of Pomerania the understanding of development as a participatory process supports local debate and practice of democratic decision-making by enhancing communication among stakeholders. Local Action Groups (LAGs) have become the most distinguished organizations at the local level that engage partners from multiple gminas<sup>1</sup> and local groups. In result LAGs can influence local representatives (local leaders) participating in internal decision-making process. Therefore, LEADER program that justifies formal development of Local Action Groups to act toward tourism development supports democratic practice in Pomerania. The most important goal of the study is to demonstrate stakeholders' perceptions of Local Action Groups and LEADER program. The concept of interactional community as it was promoted by Wilkinson (1991) is adopted to illustrate the emergence of LAG's action toward wellbeing of participating stakeholders and discuss effects of the LEADER program in rural tourism regions in Pomerania.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

A qualitative approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of local stakeholders' perceptions of tourism Local Action Groups and LEADER approach. The research included 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with members of three Local Action Groups in Pomerania. While these interviews provide rich source of knowledge about Local Action Groups and stakeholders' perspective of a LAG and LEADER approach, results of analyses of local development strategies supplement knowledge from the interviews. Notably, diversity of demonstrated views manifests dynamic character of many Local Action Groups.

### **INTERACTIONAL COMMUNITY & EMPOWERMENT**

Community ensues from creative processes (Day, 2006). The same creative processes determine whether a community continues or disappears. While social institutions often support an initiative to build a community, it can only come into being through interpretation of reality by community participants. Interpretation of socio-economic elements of their environment occurs only due to the process of social interaction. Interaction is fundamental element in community building process (Wilkinson, 1991). Community action emerges in result of interactions among participants of social fields such as education, tourism and recreation, environment, local governance, which are linked to specific rural area (Theodori, 2005). 'Social

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<sup>1</sup> The main administrative unit distinguished in Poland is a voivodeship – operating at the regional level. A voivodeship consists of two types smaller administrative units performing more locally focused task: powiats and gminas. A gmina constitutes the basic unit of local government in Poland.

field' is a process of interaction in time focused on joint interests of its participants. Whereas participants of social fields get together because of common interests, community action that addresses common concerns of participants from different social fields enhances relationship among them (Theordori, 2005).

Wilkinson (1991) points up that interactional community development stands for internal and external forces transforming social relationships among community participants. Ties between the participants of different social fields develop into local network of social ties, both formal and informal. Escalation of the network usually impacts quality of information flow, also intensifying overall interaction among social fields. Frequent interactions are empirical demonstration of emerging community. Conflicts inside a community arise from differences of interests and reflect heterogeneity of local society. Conflicts, that are indispensable element of community action, are manifested in the character of interactions (Brennan, Flint & Luloff, 2008) Structure and character of interaction also expose qualitative differences among interactional communities. Increasing frequency and strengthening of interactions increases potential for collective decision-making and realization of locally delineated goal (Wilkinson, 1974), thus improves practice of local democracy.

Empowerment of local society refers to local actors joining their efforts to improve quality of local life (Zimmerman, 1995). The process of empowerment implies a gradual increase of their capability to control elements of local environment that local society finds the most significant for its wellbeing (Fawcett, Paine-Andrews, Francisco, et al 1995). Thus, local actors become agents capable of solving problems in decision-making and capable of implementing proposed solutions. Empowerment of local society alludes to its ability to influence local decision-making (Cole, 2006). Quality of local relations among stakeholders is important factor conditioning the ability. Notably, individual characteristic of stakeholders influence community capacity. In particular local leaders can encourage collective actions through their activities (Allen & Korsching, 2004). They integrate local stakeholders and boost cooperation. In addition, collective efforts that often question traditionally proposed solutions require assistance from public and social institutions (Cole, 2006).

Empowerment of local society requires two types of investments: 1) investments in integration of stakeholders; 2) investments in activities facilitating collective efforts (Helling, Serrano & Warren, 2005). The emergence of a community is a manifestation of empowerment of local society. Empowerment builds on interactions that influence participants' involvement in action toward local wellbeing (Aigner, Raymond & Smidt, 2002). By cooperation and involvement in promotion of locality wellbeing, interactional community demonstrates local democratic practices based on social relations. Given the fundamental meaning that empowerment has for practice of local democracy in Poland, the following discussion concentrates on Local Action Groups and effects of LEADER program on rural societies.

### **LEADER & LAGs IN POLAND**

Due to EU accession in 2004 the Common Agricultural Policy became effective in Poland. Currently, revitalization of rural areas is performed within the Rural Development Program for Poland (RDP 2007-2013). Total budget of the Program is estimated for 17,2 mld Euro and the majority of funding (13,2 mld Euros) comes from European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009) . The program includes four priority axes of operations:

Axis I: Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector

Axis II: Improving the environment and the countryside

Axis III: The quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy

Axis IV: LEADER

LEADER was an experimental approach with a goal to initiate novel understanding of rural development as territorial, integrated and participatory process. LEADER introduced dynamics to local politics in Poland. Currently the main task of LEADER is to promote new understanding of development process in order to ensure sustainable practice of rural societies. The sustainable development relies on bottom-up decision-making to identify local needs and appreciate local knowledge (The Council of the European Union, 2005).

One of the fundamental goals of LEADER is to build social capacity in rural areas through development of necessary skills. Mobilization of the rural stakeholders requires bottom-up approach and increasing cooperation. Social interaction is a necessary condition for cooperation and prosperous local network of relationships (Putnam, 2000). Important feature of LEADER program is that it also provides funding for projects linked to axis III (The Council of the European Union, 2005). Many initiatives that improve economic condition of rural areas have social effects on their residents (Budzych-Szukała, 2008).

LEADER has become a legal framework for development of relations between business, social and public sectors. Stakeholders engaged in creation of local development strategy and implementation of the document combine knowledge and skills to improve quality of their lives. These representatives of different sectors (public, business and social) create Local Action Groups (LAG) –partnerships responsible for redistribution of funding among local development projects. The proposed system of redistribution allows for more efficient allocation of available funds toward realization of local needs. Cooperation within LAGs demonstrates actual ability of public, business and social sectors to get together in order to support local development goals through activities selected by stakeholders as the most needed. Participation in a LAG may result in development of new or strengthen already existing social relationships.

In the context of current transition of rural areas in Poland LEADER is a chance to improve local governance and organization of rural spaces and at the same time to improve their economic condition. Wilkin & Nurzyńska (2008) observed that many local associations were already engaged in pro-development activities and some of them implemented elements of participatory approach. Their observation agrees with results of the interviews conducted in Pomerania. Many of local partnerships and other forms of associations emerged in result of growing awareness of unrealized rural development potential. The difference between LEADER and other tourism initiatives is that the program promotes local leaders who make efforts to activate stakeholders and strengthen local cooperation. The approach improves coherence of decision-making processes and supports development of rural social capital (Budzych-Szukała, 2008):

- a) Stakeholders of a rural area should identify themselves as integrated group with common development goals.
- b) Local needs and ideas direct local development. Stakeholders participate in decision-making and implement projects realizing jointly selected strategic goals.
- c) Multiple initiatives are integrated within one designated area.
- d) Local Action Groups are dynamic organizations because they must remain open to new participants.
- e) Activities proposed within LEADER approach are innovations for many rural economies.
- f) Decisions of LAG about distribution of funds to proposed projects are in principle independent from local governments.

- g) Local Action Groups practice networking within their rural area, whereas outside the area the cooperation among LAGs is linked to specific projects.

Integration and participation of local stakeholders in creating local development strategies and other LAG activities remain the most significant in the context of socio-economic transformation of rural Poland. In fact, however application of LEADER approach will not solve all local issues alone and will be more effective when complied with regional and national measures.

LEADER program has been implemented in two stages. First stage resulted in emergence of Local Action Groups. Currently, during the second stage LAGs coordinate implementation of the development strategy. The first stage resulted in 324 groups applying for the formal status of LAG. LAGs are local centers of interaction and cooperation among sectors (social fields). Groups, in which conflict and differences dominated, experienced problems with obtaining formal status of a LAG. Groups, which managed to acquire status of Local Action Groups, have focused on (the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009):

- Support of integrated territorial development. Partners from social, business and public sectors facilitate integration. Social and business partners constitute at least 50% of total number of LAG's Decision Board.
- Facilitating cooperation across local societies included in the area of LAG. In addition LAG participates in cooperation across regions.
- LAG is obligated to participate in exchange of information and experiences within the national and international network of cooperation.

Implementation of development strategy is fundamental LAG activity for rural areas. Since 2008 many LAGs have applied for authorization to Sectoral Rural Development Program 2007-2013 to coordinate implementation of a locally created strategy and 338 LGDs qualified. Within Pomerania 16 groups are responsible for coordinating implementation of development strategies.

Many problems of Local Action Groups arise because a relatively short period of time was left to integrate members and to generate stable social relationships and to increase LAGs social potential. Local partnerships focused efforts on meeting formal criteria instead of development of strong social relationships among participating stakeholders. Nowadays LAGs experience difficulties to pursue their activities (Budzych-Szukala, 2008). Whereas interviews confirm many problems pointed by literature dealing with LEADER, they also helped to identify several new issues. The study of Local Action Groups in Pomerania demonstrates that another significant threat to LEADER and similar initiatives comes from development of airtight interactional communities, or locally dominating groups for whom LEADER became an opportunity to discriminate needs of local society. Due to LEADER these groups gain power, control tourism decision-making and eliminate rival stakeholders. It happens that local governments use LEADER funding to eliminate entrepreneurs' initiatives. As much as examples of good practice encourage rural business and social stakeholders to participate in Local Action Groups, negative examples strengthen their distrust and doubts about purpose of LAGs. In summary, the following concerns regarding LAGs, thus concerns related to practice of local democracy in Poland, stand out:

- Operation of Local Action Groups usually receives little or none support from local governments. On the contrary, in some cases too much support for LAG activities involves increased control local authorities over LAG.

- A LAG may be controlled by local governments (gmina's governments), which already agreed about their actual share in funding. Local auctions are fictional and LAG decision-making is a pre-agreed process.
- Marshal Office are authorized to re-review projects selected by local committees (created from LAG members). This popular practice in Poland demonstrated that, in fact LAGs were never authorized to make similar decisions independently from regional authorities. Such approach discourages many smaller entrepreneurs participating in LAG from submitting project proposals. In result actual impact of LEADER approach is diminished.

## CONCLUSIONS

In principle, Local Action Groups should be regarded as interactional communities including local stakeholders. The presentation presents perceived features of LAGs that suggest the interactional character of these groups, as well as it concerns perceived by their members. LAGs, as social rural phenomena usually have emerged around unique themes such as development of rural tourism. In Pomerania, rural stakeholders respond to initiatives toward tourism development because they can benefit. Tourism development motivated stakeholders to become involved in investigated Local Action Group and LEADER program. The quality of cooperation in LAGs and action indicate their current interactional character.

As suggested, in Pomerania the democratic character of LAG activities meets formal and informal obstacles. Often perceived barriers to democratic practices include institutions of local regional governance. With the current low level of trust in effectiveness of joint public-private actions and doubt in possibilities to control elements of local development, another failure of similar actions depend apathy among rural stakeholders. Some stakeholders perceive activity of public institutions within LAGs as activities 'cutting wings' of other actors. Despite limited funds Local Action Groups should concentrate efforts on improving interactions among participating stakeholders thereby changing their perceptions of public actors in a group.

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